

February 26, 2013

The Honorable Blake Farenthold
Chairman
Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, U.S. Postal Service and the Census
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-6143

Dear Chairman Farenthold:

The undersigned U.S. science, engineering and higher education organizations write to share our thoughts with your committee as you oversee existing and proposed federal travel and meeting policies. We believe it is possible to provide effective oversight without adding to the administrative burden and expense or cutting off the participation of federal scientists and engineers at conferences. As this committee gives thoughtful consideration to how to accomplish the goals of increased transparency and accountability of government conference travel, the undersigned organizations welcome the opportunity to work with you.

Federal participation in scientific and technical conferences runs the gamut from small, specialty meetings targeted to specific areas of federal interest to broad disciplinary or multi-disciplinary conferences that offer access to tens of thousands of research papers and hundreds of sessions, many of which are concurrent. Meetings are often organized as venues for interaction between scientists and engineers across government agencies and laboratories working in areas of common interest. Conferences provide a variety of opportunities for federal agencies to advance their research missions in real and tangible ways:

- Scientific, engineering and technological innovation is increasingly a joint effort between researchers from government, universities, industry, and other institutions. Information exchange through scientific and technical conferences happens three times as fast as through published journals, leading to more rapid innovation. Professional conferences benefit federal researchers and their organizations by exposing them to findings from other institutions.
- It is critically important for federal scientists and engineers to know the top researchers in their fields personally and to be as current as possible on promising research directions. This is especially true when they are responsible for funding research outside their agencies or for gathering information on worldwide breakthroughs.
- Many federal program managers use technical conferences as opportunities to engage with a wide collection of researchers for peer review, program reviews and future program planning, and to efficiently examine a large collection of independent research projects. Because the alternative is multiple visits to individual research laboratories, this approach represents a significant savings of both cost and time.
- Federal researchers and program managers who participate in formal talks, symposia and poster presentations associated with conferences are exposed to thought-provoking questions and comments from fellow researchers and are engaged in informal conversations that may continue

long after the conference or meeting. Such interactions foster productive collaborations and accelerate and improve the work of federal researchers and funders.

- Many science and technology conferences provide undergraduate and graduate students with an opportunity to present their research through poster sessions, allowing federal researchers and program managers an opportunity to recruit prospective researchers.

As a community, we recognize that the government has a responsibility to prevent wasteful government spending and that the existing policy governing travel was developed to achieve that end. However, uncertainties on how to implement these policies have led to unintended consequences and have negatively impacted participation by federal scientists and engineers in science and technology conferences. This impedes the dissemination of research that results in useful innovation and will have adverse, long-term consequences on our national competitiveness.

We appreciate that the current policies were created with the intention of carefully reviewing public expenditures allocated for travel and meetings. However, in addition to limiting the benefits derived from federally funded research, policy-makers should take into consideration that new accounting and reporting policies will also add to the administrative costs of travel and conferences.

The science and engineering research community understands that fiscal constraints are currently forcing agencies to administer travel budgets more stringently. We support efforts by Congress and the Administration to ensure the transparency and accountability of federal expenditures. Opportunities such as the hearing before the House Government Reform and Oversight committee provide a mechanism for understanding the positive and negative consequences of new oversight endeavors. With that in mind, we encourage you to reach out to stakeholders in the science, engineering and higher education community as you carefully consider oversight policies.

For further information from representatives of this community, please do not hesitate to contact Joanne Carney of AAAS at jcarney@aaas.org or 202-326-6431, or Ray Garant of ACS at r_garant@acs.org or 202-872-6063.

American Association for the Advancement of Science
American Chemical Society
American Geophysical Union
American Physical Society
Computing Research Association
Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology
IEEE-USA
Materials Research Society
SPIE - The International Society for Optics and Photonics
The Alliance for Science & Technology Research in America
The American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics
The Optical Society
U.S. Public Policy Council of the Association for Computing Machinery

copy: The Honorable Stephen Lynch, Subcommittee Ranking Member
The Honorable Rush Holt, U.S. House of Representatives (NJ-12)